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ABSTRACT

A questionnaire was sent to gay and lesbian youth support groups around the country asking what it felt like to be gay and lesbian in high school, and how young people thought teachers and counselors could make their classrooms more comfortable for gay and lesbian students. The 44 responses came from young people who had attended public or parochial high schools in 17 states and 1 foreign country. The great majority (37) were male. Most of the respondents were in their early 20s and indicated that they were between 12 and 18 years old when they first became aware of being gay. Most of the few positive mentions of homosexuality in high school took place in the English classroom, and all five respondents who were "out" to teachers confided in English teachers. More than half the respondents did not come out to their friends. Only 6 said they were victims of violence, although 11 endured verbal abuse by students who perceived them as gay. None of the respondents indicated good memories of high school. Some respondents spoke directly about breaking the silence surrounding homophobia and urged teachers to find out about gay and lesbian resources and make them available to students. Respondents also urged gay and lesbian teachers to come out to their students. Teachers have the opportunity to affirm diversity in the classroom, curricula, and in interactions with students and other faculty members. (RS)

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LISTENING TO GAY AND LESBIAN TEENAGERS

NCTE, November, 1991

I have been listening to gay and lesbian teenagers since May 1985, when my 18-year-old daughter told me about her first romantic relationship with a woman. Since then, I have seen her grow into a warm and loving adult, secure in her sexuality and supported by family and friends who value her for herself. At the same time, I have watched other gay and lesbian teenagers--friends of my daughter, students in my classes, children of parents I have met through PFLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays). Some share my daughter's confidence and sense of self-worth; some are still questioning their sexuality; many are desperately lonely, knowing they are "different," and rejected by every significant adult in their lives. All are struggling to affirm themselves in a world where they feel threatened or invisible.

For gay and lesbian youth, the typical stresses of adolescent development take on traumatic, even tragic dimensions. Like their heterosexual contemporaries, they struggle with peer pressure, parental authority, sexuality and personal identity; yet unlike most adolescents, gay and lesbian youth are forced to deal with these issues in a hostile world that fears and rejects them. If they are brave enough to reveal their sexual

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orientation to friends, teachers and parents, they risk ridicule, ostracism and violence. If, like most gay adolescents, they try to hide their identity, they live in constant fear that someone will discover they are gay. Even if they are successful at concealment, they must live every day as a lie, pretending to be someone they are not, and surrounded by homophobic jokes and comments in the classroom, the locker room and the cafeteria. Unlike children of racial and ethnic minorities, who may turn to family and community for support, most gay and lesbian teenagers carry the double burden of being part of an oppressed minority, and knowing absolutely no one like themselves. Faced with such pain, it is not surprising that at least 30% of all teenage suicides have been identified as gay and lesbian youth.

As teachers, it is our responsibility to affirm all our students, including the ten percent who are gay and lesbian. Anyone who spends time in a high school is surely aware that homophobia--fear and hatred of gay people--is the last "acceptable" form of bigotry among adolescents. Young people who would not dream of uttering (or would not dare to utter) a racial or religious epithet still unthinkingly toss around "queer" and "faggot," probably the most often heard insults in any high school. All of us, but especially those with the security and privilege of heterosexuality, have an obligation to provide a safe place for gay and lesbian adolescents through our words and actions.

But speaking and acting against homophobia in our classrooms

and our schools does more than just support the ten per cent; it sends a message to all students that who they are does not depend on who they love, any more than it depends on whether they are rich or poor, white or brown, able-bodied or disabled.

In order to begin to undo the gay-hating and gay-baiting that pervade our schools, we need to examine our own attitudes toward sexual orientation as well as our students'. But most of all, we need to listen to our gay and lesbian students, the most immediate victims of homophobia. Who are they, and what can they tell us about their lives? How does it feel to be gay or lesbian, and a teenager in an American high school?

In order to begin answering that question, I sent a questionnaire to gay and lesbian youth support groups around the country, asking what it felt like to be gay and lesbian in high school, and how young people thought teachers and counselors could make their classrooms more comfortable for gay and lesbian students.

The 44 responses to my survey came from young people who had attended public or parochial high schools in 17 states and one foreign country. The great majority (37) were male. Given what I have learned about gay and lesbian youth, this discrepancy does not surprise me, for the majority of those who attend meetings at gay-lesbian support groups are male. Gay teenagers are not immune from the gender role-playing that afflicts their heterosexual peers, and young men in these groups often behave in ways that intimidate and alienate young lesbians. In addition,

young lesbians, like women in general, tend to be more adept at establishing emotional relationships, and often turn to groups within the lesbian and women's community for support. I will need to extend my research into the lesbian community to gather more gender-balanced data; however, my informal conversations with young lesbians lead me to believe that many of the comments in these questionnaires could apply to them as well as to young gay men.

Most of my respondents are now in their early 20's, close enough to their teens to recall their high school experiences vividly. Most remember clearly their first awareness of being gay, an awareness that came earlier than many heterosexual adults might guess. In response to the question, "When did you first identify as gay or lesbian?", a majority of respondents indicated they were between 12 and 18 years of age. The largest group (18 people) were 12, 13 or 14. Nine said they had known they were gay before age 12; one young man wrote "as young as I can remember," and another wrote, "from birth." The fact that these young people were becoming aware of their sexual orientation at puberty means that gay and lesbian high school students and even junior high students already know they are different and are already suffering the twin oppressions of invisibility and the fear of violence.

Respondents described this invisibility in a number of ways. In answer to the question, "Was homosexuality mentioned in your high school classes?", 26 said "no." Of the 19 "yes" answers,

only a few were positive. Interestingly for us, most of these few positive references occurred in English classes. Several said homosexuality was mentioned in health class, without any context, and often in a negative way. One lesbian recalled that her health instructor told the class that homosexuality was a form of mental illness. A student who attended a parochial school said homosexuality was discussed as a sin in his religion class.

The teachers who ignored or derided homosexuality may very well have been unaware that there were gay or lesbian students in their classes. When asked if the significant adults in their lives knew of their sexual orientation, most said "no." Only five said they were out to a teacher, and (again, interestingly for us) all five of these teachers were English teachers. This parallel between teachers' gay affirmative behavior and students' self-disclosure is an important link, and I shall return to it later.

The only other adults in whom these young people felt free to confide were other gay people, and only three of the 44 respondents knew such a person. One was an uncle, another a bookstore owner and a third a neighbor. For the rest, there were no gay adults to provide role models, and they did not feel they could trust the heterosexual adults in their lives (including parents) with their sexual identity.

As far as trusting their peers, when asked, "Did you come out to any of your friends in high school?", more than half (29) said "no"; only 8 reported that their straight friends accepted

them after learning they were gay. Some came out to their high school friends after graduation, with mixed results; some acquaintances were accepting, others withdrew from the friendship as soon as they learned that their friend was gay or lesbian.

The most surprising information in my survey came in response to the question, "While in high school, were you ever a victim of violence?" Given the prevalence of violence against gays and lesbians in society at large, I expected many of my respondents to answer "yes" to this question. In fact, only six said that they had in fact been victims of physical assault; 38 answered "no," though 11 of these 38 indicated that they had endured verbal abuse by students who perceived them as gay, even when they themselves had not come out to others. On first reading these responses, I concluded that my subjects' efforts to remain in the closet had spared them the worst excesses of abuse by their homophobic classmates. But as I read through their comments and thought about their lives, I began to rephrase the question, and the answers. Whether or not these students had been victims of direct physical or verbal attacks, they were all victims of violence--the deep psychological violence of having to deny who they were in order to protect themselves, and of living in constant fear of being found out. Several who did have gay acquaintances saw their friends beaten up. All had to listen to the constant litany of anti-gay and anti-lesbian remarks that float through any public high school. All had to choose between pretending to be what they were not (heterosexual) or risking

rejection and attack. It is interesting to note that although I did not have a specific question about suicide on my questionnaire, five respondents spontaneously mentioned it as an issue. Three said they seriously considered suicide as teenagers; one mentioned the suicide of a gay classmate which the respondent was convinced was linked to the classmate's isolation as a homosexual teenager. A lesbian student who did not fill out the survey but who recently talked with me told me that she had actually attempted suicide four times while in high school. For those familiar with the pattern of gay and lesbian self abuse and self hatred, such stories, sadly, come as no surprise.

Finally, I asked my gay and lesbian respondents to recall their best and worst memories of high school. Eighteen either said they had no good memories, or left this space blank. Of the respondents who did list "best" memories, most wrote of experiences outside school--falling in love, or visiting a gay and lesbian bookstore for the first time. None of them expressed the typical graduate's nostalgia for happy high school days--sports, extracurricular activities, social events, hanging out with friends. For most of these teenagers, such moments were excruciating tests of their ability to appear heterosexual in a potentially hostile environment. Amid all these memories of pain and anxiety, a few recalled a supportive word or gesture from a high school teacher. The gratitude with which these young adults remembered the lone teacher or counselor who affirmed their gay identity is a poignant reminder of their isolation.

I concluded my survey by asking my respondents if they had any advice for teachers seeking to make life a little less lonely for gay and lesbian students now in high school or junior high. Again, the simplicity of their answers tells us how little it takes for teachers to make a difference in the lives of students. "Gay teens need to hear that somebody is taking them seriously--[that] they're not crazy." "We are not bad kids. We don't like to be thought of that way." "Be more supportive and attentive to this issue. No teenager should leave high school needing to see a therapist so as to figure out why it had to be so bad." Like all teenagers, gay teenagers want to be treated like everyone else: "There isn't any difference except we like the same sex but otherwise I like to do everything that everyone else likes." "I would suggest that teachers and counselors treat the gay and lesbian students the same as they would treat any other students." "Try to be supportive and not make someone feel out cast." "Do not judge or threaten them with counseling as if they aren't normal." "Accept us for what we are, a regular teenager, just like every other teen. . . except our 'sexual preference' is different. That's all!" "Gays' sexual views might be different, but their hearts hurt like everyone else's."

Some respondents spoke more directly about breaking the silence surrounding homophobia. They urged teachers to interrupt verbal or physical violence against gay students: "stop kids when they are being harassed by other students and [don't] ignore the situation." "Don't tolerate anti-gay comments in

class." Others cited bringing gay awareness into the curriculum. "I never even heard the word gay unless someone was calling someone a fag," wrote one young man. Another wrote, "Let them [gay people] be mentioned (positively) once in a while. The loneliness can eat a person up." "Talk," wrote a gay man just out of his teens. "Use openly gay authors for English. Discuss Stonewall and Mattachine in History and Politics. Just keep talking." A gay man who attended a parochial school wrote, "High school teachers have a wonderful opportunity of reaching out to gay and lesbian youths and helping them feel good about themselves and the way they were treated. . . . If somebody would have said to me, 'well you are probably gay and that is ok,' I could have come to terms with my feelings earlier and saved myself years of turmoil." A young lesbian advised, "You don't have to understand gay/lesbianism. You don't have to agree with it. You do as a professional HAVE TO STOP ANY AND ALL PREJUDICE going on around you in the hall in the class and on the street." A gay man recalled, "I can still hear my gym teacher making 'fag' jokes during class. It made me cringe inside. . . . the most important thing a school can do is make it known that harassment will not be tolerated under any circumstances. . . . in most cases schools turn their backs. This in my opinion is the biggest mistake a school can make. It sends the message that gays and lesbians deserve abuse."

Respondents also urged teachers to find out about gay and lesbian resources and make them available to gay students--books,

community programs, hotlines and support groups which exist in every state. Such resources are particularly important in small, isolated communities, where gay teenagers and adults are likely to be especially closeted. Though there may be no gay support group within a teenager's reach, just knowing about the network of state and national organizations may make him or her feel less isolated.

Teenagers had particular advice for gay and lesbian teachers. Since virtually all my respondents longed for adult gay and lesbian role models, it is not surprising that many urged gay and lesbian teachers to come out to their students. "I suggest some of the teachers should come out if they are lesbian or gay and have peer counselors that also identify as gay or lesbian," wrote one young lesbian. Another said, "if you are gay, be out. Being openly gay would do more than anything. If the students know you're gay you're a living example." But many were realistic about the risks of coming out as a gay or lesbian teacher. A man who did not identify as gay until after high school, wrote, "In the absence of teachers/counselors who can safely and openly be out so that students can see gay people who are normal. I would like that in health or some required class the issue of homosexuality be addressed and discussed just so students, who like me at the time might feel confused, might have the chance to discover for themselves their true sexual identities." One of the lesbians quoted above added, "the best a teacher can do, whether they're gay or straight, is just be

themselves. . . . Every counselor should have books about gay teens in their office--have them visible. Kids are very observant. If they see that, then that sends a message that 'you guys are worthy of that trust.'"

By now I hope you are convinced that teachers can take the initiative in supporting gay and lesbian teenagers and helping to end homophobia in their classrooms and schools. In case you still need any convincing, I'd like to read you a comment by a gay man who attached a long essay to his questionnaire describing in detail his alienation from his family and his isolation in high school as a gay Puerto Rican teenager. (In fact, he compared his high school to "Hill House," the menacing abode in Shirley Jackson's short story, "The Haunting of Hill House.") Of his teachers, he wrote: "I can't explain their stupid behavior towards us. I don't know what they thought they were giving us, but it wasn't an education. My self esteem has never been at such an extreme low as during those times. My post-high school plans were very simple. I planned to either commit suicide, or become a prostitute in New York City, but that changed in the last year, when I finally got the attention and support I needed. . . . In my last year of high school I had a literature class in which I hinted to my teacher that I was gay. She understood, and was sympathetic to me. She made a minor change in the reading requirements and had us read Tennessee Williams' The Glass Menagerie as an example to the class of accomplishments of homosexuals in American Literature. . . . If it hadn't been for

her encouragement I never would have made college."

As teachers, we have the opportunity to affirm diversity in our classrooms, our curricula, our interactions with students and other faculty members. If we are gay or lesbian, we can serve as badly needed role models for gay and lesbian youth--if not by being out publicly in school, than by quietly affirming our gay and lesbian students and letting them know we care about them. If we are straight, we can remind other heterosexual teachers and students that homophobia hurts everyone and is everybody's issue. Whoever we are, we can listen--really listen--to our gay and lesbian teenagers. When we do, we will find that what they have to tell us is very simple: Respect us for who we are. Affirm our right to be who we are. Help us to feel less alone. Protect us from people who would hurt us. Care about us.